

# THE GLOBE AND MAIL

SE Business  
 HD **How Trudeau's government can avoid crises like the coronavirus derailing its climate agenda; If governments put in place a small number of drastic policies aimed at steady emissions reduction, they could more easily turn their attention elsewhere while these policies took effect**  
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So much for this year's federal budget being all about environmental and energy policy.

Never mind what the Liberals have been foreshadowing through the winter, after coming away from the fall election convinced that climate change is what now motivates their voters.

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They didn't count on the COVID-19 virus overtaking all else, as a global economic threat on top of a health one. It now seems more inevitable by the day that Finance Minister Bill Morneau will largely be pressed to explain how he will blunt the virus's financial impact and account for emergency costs, while dealing with its potentially large hit to revenues.

The shifting focus stands to be cause for considerable frustration among environmentalists who have spent decades trying to get governments to take a more urgent approach to climate action – only to see that urgency, when finally materializing, take a backseat to an emergency less threatening to humanity in the long run.

[Coronavirus guide: The latest news on COVID-19 and the toll it's taking around the worldWhat can I do about COVID-19? A guide for Canadians of what's helpful, and what's not](#)

But taking into account other events that have distracted the Liberals from the focus they thought they'd have in the early months of their new mandate – among them the downing of Flight 752 in Iran and pipeline protests primarily related to First Nations rights – there is a takeaway here about how a serious effort to reduce emissions needs to be sustained over a very long trajectory.

It's nice to imagine that, because of climate change's existential threat, it will steadily get more focus from government and the public alike. But it's not likely to work that way – since the effects of the threat aren't currently felt in most Canadians' day-to-day lives. There will often be something with more immediate stakes.

So if governments are to succeed at putting and keeping the country on a path to dramatically reduced emissions, they will require an ability to orient themselves around policies that aren't the flashiest at any given moment – something that doesn't come naturally to politicians and staffers who want to show leadership on the biggest challenges of the day.

There will be times when climate change is the hot file; it seemed to be, coming out of the election. But it can't be prioritized only when it has the run of the news cycle – not given the consistently swift progress that is needed to stave off catastrophe, and with the fragmented approach now being taken.

If governments put in place a small number of drastic policies aimed at steady emissions reduction – a very high carbon price being the obvious example – they could more easily turn their attention elsewhere while these policies took effect. But Mr. Trudeau's Liberals and most anyone else trying to tackle climate change are instead counting on pulling a great many levers to meet 2030 Paris Agreement or 2050 net-zero targets.

In short order, Ottawa is supposed to be steadily rolling out transportation electrification and building retrofit programs, supports for clean-technology sectors, a market-based mechanism to make fuels less carbon-intensive, a massive tree-planting plan, and lots else besides. In most cases these policies, after being implemented, are supposed to steadily get more ambitious.

That's all going to necessitate a lot of articulation to Canadians from the Prime Minister about how it fits together. But what it will also require, largely missing to date, are systems that allow the effort to maintain momentum even when his attention is elsewhere.

Such systemic changes could take many forms: Perhaps a cabinet restructuring that would give an environment minister greater trust and responsibility to steer policies. Or the creation of quasi-independent agencies or oversight bodies, aimed at some degree of climate-policy depoliticization and in turn greater consistency. Or, at least, empowered teams of senior officials within the Prime Minister's Office or Privy Council Office, solely focused on steering climate policies through government, regardless of what else is going on.

It's not that, without something along these lines, all climate policy development completely grinds to a halt. It's a matter of pace, for a government that purports to consider climate change an emergency, whatever else is happening in the news.

Mr. Morneau's budget will be a case in point: Most of the climate-related commitments he has already planned, such as infrastructure investments or measures around disclosure of climate-related financial risks, will remain in the document even if they get less public emphasis because of the coronavirus.

But as usual in a budget, much of what's announced will require followup before it's actually implemented.

It will have to happen fast, for Ottawa to move on to whatever is next in its plan to meet its targets. And it will need laser-like focus from people who aren't preoccupied with the coronavirus, or the next crisis to come along after it.

Follow this link to view this story on globeandmail.com: [How Trudeau's government can avoid crises like the coronavirus derailing its climate agenda](#)

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